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SUBJECT: POMEGRANATES RIPE FOR COIN: A COUNTERINSURGENCY
OPERATION CASE STUDY FROM KAPISA PROVINCE, AFGHANISTAN

REF: KABUL 03776

Classified By: Interagency Provincial Affairs Deputy Director Hoyt Yee
for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: TaGab, a GIRoA critical district and home to thriving Taliban, Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin (HiG), and criminal networks, has been targeted by Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) Kapisa as the focus of its counterinsurgency efforts. The initial phase of the effort, "Operation Red," is based on the formation of a pomegranate cooperative, which hopes to open up markets in Kabul, India, Dubai, and beyond and fetch much higher prices than the hard-pressed (and insurgent-linked) farmers of TaGab have traditionally received from Pakistan-based buyers. Having created much good will among the people and leaders of TaGab, PRT will build on this effort through continued stabilization and development programs. The effort continues to involve diverse U.S., international, and Afghan players. Despite continued optimism, however, Operation Red has been replete with stumbling blocks, setbacks, and the need for patient and persistent prodding by the PRT's integrated civil-military team and our partners. It is a case study for both the possibilities and pitfalls of counterinsurgency operations.
End Summary.

Roots of the Insurgency

¶2. (SBU) TaGab District, located at the southern end of Kapisa Province, has a long history of conflict. Its inhabitants are primarily Pashtun of the Gilzai tribe. The TaGab Valley marked the furthest continuous point of Soviet advance to the northeast during the Soviet occupation, the main Northern Alliance (NA)/HiG front lines during the civil war, and the NA/Taliban line of demarcation during the Taliban era. It is strategically located near the approaches to both Kabul and Bagram Air Field. The Taliban, HiG, and criminal warlords have all found ready recruits in TaGab, and insurgent attacks against coalition forces have been on the upswing, with improvised explosive device (IED), indirect fire, and direct fire incidents an almost daily occurrence. As described REFTEL, however, the Kapisa-based insurgency is non-ideological and lacks significant command-and-control elements. Local leaders with diverse points of view continue to point out that most fighters are unemployed young men looking to earn quick cash. They stress that "every one of them would drop their rifles" if there were more economic opportunity. (Note: On November 1, French Task Force Lafayette became the battle space owner. PRT Kapisa will continue to operate in Kapisa, working in coordination with the French. End note.)

Pomegranates: Ripe for Exploitation

¶3. (SBU) Operation Red began with conversations between Special Forces (SoF) operating out of Forward Operating Base (FOB) Kutschbach and local leaders. The elders described how Pakistani traders would engage pomegranate farmers in a downward bidding war and then trucking syndicates would demand high prices to get the produce to market. SoF contacted PRT Kapisa with a request for assistance. In September, PRT Kapisa was joined by the Kentucky National Guard Agriculture Development Team (ADT), USAID contractors, French CIMICs (civil affairs), and a representative from a modern pomegranate juicing factory in Kabul. These players called a shura (community meeting), which was attended by leading elders, Islamic figures, and some 70 local pomegranate farmers. GIRoA was represented by the Director of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock (DAIL), and the provincial government was represented by the sub-governor. Security was provided by SoF, a Police Mentor Team, Romanian special forces, the French army, and Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).

¶4. (S) During the shura, USAID contractors offered to help farmers establish a legal cooperative and market their pomegranates to Dubai and India. PRT offered to pay for boxing and shipping the fruit to the juicing company for the first year. ADT, working with the DAIL, agreed to on-going assistance to improve the health and productivity of the pomegranate crop through technical assistance. The French outlined plans to build a cool storage facility in the district. At the conclusion of the shura, the sub-governor quickly organized those farmers in attendance into a cooperative. Within days there were 160 members (representing perhaps the majority of TaGab's pomegranate

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growers) and an executive board with representation from TaGab's five main regions was elected. Both traditional and sensitive reporting throughout the area, including in critical neighboring districts, indicated that the effort was well-known and well-regarded by the populace. The PRT also learned that the program was so popular that the Taliban decided not to attempt any disruption. Colonel Zelwar, the local chief of police and a positive influencer, stated: "The Taliban knows that if it tries to harm this effort, the people will rise up against it." (Note: In the two months since the first pomegranate shura, the number of locals who have reported IEDs and planned ambushes on coalition forces has increased significantly. End note.)

Problems Crop Up

¶5. (S) Almost immediately, however, there were signs that the process would not be smooth. The farmers have been reluctant to risk any of their own capital on the enterprise. They balked at even paying for passports and visas for two representatives to go to Dubai and India to make deals, even though airline tickets, hotels, and the cost of shipping four tons of pomegranates to these markets was already being paid for. At a follow-up shura, board members tried to goad the PRT into paying USD 2,000 per truck load of pomegranates to the juicing factory just 90 kilometers away. Also, the board member chosen to negotiate a good price with the juicing company was found to have undercut his own cooperative by making a separate deal at a lower price for his own fruit. As the board dithered, other local farmers cut deals with the factory to sell some 750 metric tons of pomegranates apart from the co-op. Even more seriously, sensitive reporting indicates that the Taliban, while not seeking to disrupt Operation Red, has pressured the cooperative into paying a "zegat" or Islamic tax to the insurgent network. The total amount could range from 7 to 20 percent.

Patient and Persistent Diplomacy Bears Fruit

¶6. (S) To counter the problems described above, PRT Kapisa

has permanently stationed a seasoned civil affairs sergeant at FOB Kutschbach to interact with co-op and local leaders daily. PRT's USAID and State Reps have also traveled to TaGab several times, both with ADT and DAIL, and individually to educate, encourage, and exhort. We have offered solutions to legitimate problems, pushed back on bogus requests, and patiently built relationships with key players. At one crucial juncture when it looked like Operation Red would fall apart, we brought in two highly-respected local elders to cajole the co-op board out of its hesitancy. We also used the elders to identify the board member who attempted to forge his own deal at the expense of the others. He has since been replaced. Regarding the Taliban zeqat, PRT is preparing an Information Operation (IO) to use the issue to create psychological space between the insurgents and farmers. The co-op has now signed a contract for an initial 30 metric ton shipment to the juicing factory at a price 40% higher than what farmers received last year. The co-op is hopeful that it will receive even more favorable prices as the harvest continues. The planned shipments of two tons of pomegranates to Dubai and two tons to New Delhi in order to foster further international deals are also underway. TaGab also produces rare seedless pomegranates, which have received offers as much as five times the traditional rate. (Note: These high prices have actually been a source of some of our difficulties, as farmers engage in high-stakes brinkmanship for ever better prices. End note.)

Branching Out and Harvesting the Good Will

¶7. (S) PRT Kapisa has designed a multi-phased counterinsurgency operation based on the initial success of the pomegranate cooperative. The next step will be for the ADT, again working with the DAIL and local extension agents, to provide training on pruning, fumigation, and fertilization. The PRT will then hire trained military aged men to do pruning and other orchard-care projects over the winter. These and additional cash-for-work projects will dissuade those men from seeking work in Pakistan and Iran where some are recruited into the insurgency. We will take biometrics from those men as well. The pruning and other projects should also greatly increase next year's pomegranate yield. Furthermore, insurgents often use the never-before-pruned orchards as staging grounds for attacks. The newly trimmed trees will offer much less cover during

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the spring fighting season.

¶8. (SBU) PRT Kapisa plans to follow up on Operation Red by fostering cooperatives for other agricultural products. We will also work to form trucking, carpentry, masonry, and other economic enterprises in TaGab in close concert with our Afghan partners at various levels. A continuous IO effort will tout the benefits of locals working hand-in-hand with GIRoA, finger insurgents for stealing locals' hard-earned cash, and emphasize the need for other critical districts to join in similar efforts so their people too can benefit.

Final Pickings

¶9. (C) Comment. Nothing about this process has been easy and it must be expected that we will face continuing roadblocks. Furthermore, this success could be difficult to duplicate in other highly kinetic areas. One advantage in TaGab is that the district center is located less than a kilometer from the entrance to FOB Kutschbach, and just outside an ANSF compound run by a dedicated anti-insurgent police chief. This security bubble has allowed the PRT and ADT relatively unhindered access to our interlocutors. It is the deepening relationships that have allowed the operation to move forward. Also, it is clear that many farmers (and some of the local leaders) we are dealing with have had or continue to have close ties with insurgents. This offers

both a challenge and an opportunity. Finally, now that the French have taken over the battle space in Kapisa, we must continue to seek their support and participation. End comment.

Eikenberry